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Religion, Possession, and the “Hysteresis Effect”

A Case Study from India

William S. Sax

The human body has been of central importance to the human and social sciences for decades. In German Anthropology, one of the most significant contributions to this field was the 2001 volume by Brigitta Hauser-Schäublin (together with Vera Kalitzkus, Imme Petersen and Iris Schröder) *Der geteilte Leib. Eine ethnologische Untersuchung zu Reproduktionsmedizin und Organtransplantation in Deutschland* (The Divided Body: An Ethnological Investigation of Reproductive Medicine and Organ Transplantation in Germany). Another very influential writer in this field is the sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. His pithy aphorisms like “There is an entire cosmology hidden in the phrase ‘Sit up straight!’” or “Belief is a state of the body” point to a complex theory of the way in which what one might call “culture” (a term that Bourdieu avoids) is acquired and transmitted: not as a set of rules that can be formulated in language, but rather as a set of embodied practices that are mostly learned by mimesis and (what is of more importance for this article) associated with particular regions of social space. In matters of taste, for example, professors tend to lean towards jazz or classical music while members of the working class are more likely to listen to Country/Western in the USA or the beloved “Schlager” in Germany.

But what happens when a person moves from one part of social space to another, in which one’s own embodied practices no longer fit; where they are perhaps thought to be inappropriate, vulgar, or snobbish? In this essay, I discuss this question in relation to religious possession. “Possession” is of course fascinating in its own right, largely because

of the challenges it poses to our conventional ideas of embodiment. But beyond that, it is interesting to see what happens to the practice of “possession” in regions of social space where it is no longer acceptable.

The research on which this essay is based was undertaken in the north Indian state of Uttarakhand, which lies at the junction of India, Tibet, and Northwest Nepal and is culturally very diverse. Its numerous ethnic groups speak languages from three different language families; the population includes Hindus, Buddhists, Muslims, Sikhs, Animists, and Christians; most people in the state are farmers, some are transhumant, others are nomads, a few live in cities, and a very few are hunters and gatherers; and of course there are the various castes. Although Muslims make up slightly more than 10% of the population, the overwhelming majority of them are concentrated in the North Indian plains and in some of the larger towns in the hills, however they are nearly absent from the rural mountain areas that make up the majority of the state. The exception for these rural areas are many widely scattered, small hamlets consisting exclusively of Muslims. Virtually no research has been done on them. In Chamoli District these Muslims are of very low caste, at approximately the same level of the social hierarchy as the Harijans or Dalits, some of whom were formerly known as “Untouchables.” Rural Muslims sometimes, but with decreasing frequency, marry persons from these low castes. Traditionally, their primary occupation was making and selling glass bangles, which is why they used to be called *culyor* or “bangers.” Some people claim they are descended from soldiers of the Mughal Emperors who settled in the hills, but I have found no evidence of this.

In the 1980s and 90s the Muslims in Firozpur, a small hamlet near Rudraprayag that I regularly visited over a long period, did not emphasize their separate identity. The language and dress of both men and women were almost indistinguishable from their Hindu neighbours, and they participated in many of the Hindu festivals. As one Muslim woman from Firozpur said to me, “We are just like them, only we celebrate two sets of festivals instead of one.” One senior male said,

when there is a wedding, or a funeral ritual for someone’s parent, they (the Hindus) call me. I think that’s good, and I eat their food. But how can I reciprocate?¹ So I’ve made my own system, sitting here in my home: I call some Sarola Brahmans² to cook the food. It costs me a bit of money, but so what? [...] Of course the Hindus say they won’t eat our food [...] but I always tell them they can eat at my home if they wish. And when on some occasions we cook meat, they are glad to eat it! In our major festivals I order a big goat, with at least 25–30 kilos of meat on it, but it’s still never enough for us, because so many of them come to eat meat [...].

Of greater significance for my argument here is the fact that until recently at least, rural Muslims throughout the region were deeply involved in Hindu religious practices, including the worship of local *devtas* (gods and spirits). An elderly Muslim told me the following story:

My grandfather had four daughters. He was a Supervisor³ at that time. The local Brahmans respected him. They had invited him to a village meeting, and while it was going on they said to him, “Sahab, you don’t have a son, so summon the goddess!” In those days, people’s faith was firm – they had a lot of it! So he summoned the goddess, and she possessed someone, and right there during the meeting she promised him (that she would grant him a son)! She told him that he would have to give two *athwars*.⁴ And he said, “Fine, but I want two sons!” Look at how much faith he had – and it came true! [...] He purchased the buffalo, and they sacrificed eight goats. And he did a second *athvar*, too. He didn’t break his word. I don’t know about the other families, but this at much is true of my own. There’s an old Garhwali saying, *Jaham basna vaham ghasna* (Rub yourself with the soil of the place you live) – and that saying is true!

He went on to describe how local Muslims performed certain Hindu rituals to protect their livestock, and how many of them had ancestral Hindu *devtas* like Goril, Devi, and Narsingh. On the one hand, he said, they shouldn’t worship these gods, because they were Muslims, but on the other hand they *had* to do so. They may have “tossed the gods out” here and there, but in the end they had to worship them. Beginning in early 2005 however, things began to change in Firozpur. Missionaries from the plains – referred to as “Mullahs” by local Muslims as well as Hindus – discovered the hamlet and began to visit it more often. They persuaded residents to perform the *namaz* more regularly, they sent a teacher to help them study the Koran, and they even convinced them to build a mosque. Men from the hamlet began growing their beards and coloring them with henna, and those few who could afford it kept their women indoors and away from the fields. In short, they began to assert their separate identity as Muslims, in a way that they never had before. Of course one of the most important – if not *the* most important – of the demands made by the “Mullahs” was that these village Muslims should stop worshiping local *devtas*. And for some local Muslims, this led to a *dharam sankat*, a “problem of religion.” Here is how a local Hindu priest summarized what happened:

Ghazi Miya lives in Firozpur, and his ancestral *devta* is Goril.⁵ His father used to worship Goril quite a lot: the *devta* would possess him and he would give oracular consultations. But when the old man died, his surviving relatives decided that, because they were Muslims, they should give up this practice. But after they did so, Ghazi Miya’s elder brother died, and then his mother died, too. He consulted a local oracle, who told him that he was being afflicted by Goril. So Ghazi Miya came to me and told me that he had a problem of religion (*dharam sankat*). He told me that he wasn’t supposed to worship Goril, but the *devta* would afflict him if he didn’t; on the other hand if he did worship Goril, his fellow villagers would “become his enemies.” They would accuse him of keeping the god secretly. So he was damned if he did and damned if he didn’t (literally “Killed from one side and killed from the other side.”)

Ritual, Habitus, and the Hysteresis-Effect

The Muslim peasant Ghazi Miya was afflicted by the Hindu *devta* Goril, and in order to get rid of the affliction, he had to honor Goril by sponsoring a *puja*⁶ for him. If such a *puja* is successful, the *devta* manifests himself by “dancing” in the body of one of the participants. If the *devta* does not dance, it means that the ritual has failed, the god has not come, and the affliction will continue. So dancing (that is, “possession”) is essential to remove the affliction, but could these Muslims still dance? They had deliberately and systematically decided to stop participating in local ritual practices, and had even “tossed out” or “buried” the external signs of their ancestral *devtas*. They were intentionally seeking to change their habitus, defined by Bourdieu as a

system of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary in order to attain them. Objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor. (1990:53)

These dispositions only become “visible” in relation to a “field,” a more-or-less autonomous dimension of social existence; “economics” for example, or “kinship.” In the present case, the relevant “field” is that of ritual. It is crucial to remember that habitus is not primarily a mental structure (as some theorists have mistakenly asserted), but rather a set of *embodied* dispositions. How one prepares for a ritual event (bathing, fasting, removing one’s shoes, ensuring that there is nothing in one’s mouth), speaks to a god (folding one’s hands before one’s chest, using particular forms of address, assuming a subordinate physical posture), or an oracle (to the preceding list one might add an attitude of skepticism and an insistence on having one’s questions correctly answered), or a ghost (constantly assuring the ghost of one’s concern and love, stroking and touching the person possessed by a ghost), becomes possessed (initial shaking and trembling followed by the forms of “dancing” or movement associated with the particular supernatural being, responding to the waving of incense or the hurling of rice grains, using particular linguistic forms), along with hundreds other details, are unreflectively internalized during the process of ritual socialization, resulting in a sense of “how things are done” in rituals; what Bell calls “ritual mastery” (1992:107–108).

In my previous research I had already seen what happened to those persons whose habitus had changed, who were no longer integrated into traditional society: educated professionals, emigrants to the city, military officers, NRIs (non-resident Indians) living overseas, students studying in urban universities, and the like. When confronted with the possession-rituals of the hills – which are very common indeed – such people reacted with amusement, disdain, or shocked disbelief. And few if any of them were

able to “dance” – that is, to be possessed – like their rural cousins. They suffered from what Bourdieu calls the “hysteresis effect,” when the practices associated with the old habitus

incur negative sanctions when the environment with which they are actually confronted is too distant from that to which they are objectively fitted [...] caus[ing] one group to experience as natural or reasonable practices or aspirations which another group finds unthinkable or scandalous, and vice versa. (1977:78)⁷

The question for me was, what would happen to these Muslim villagers, who were in the geographical center of the traditional culture with its possession rituals? Would they still be able to “dance” like their Hindu neighbors or would they lose this capability, like the city-dwellers and others mentioned above? My friend the priest continued:

So finally they did a *puja* – this was twenty-five years or so after they had tossed the god out. I was the priest. They did the *puja* according to the rules. And the other people from the village must have also had *devtas* whom they had buried, just as Ghazi Miya had done. And they said to him, “If you want to do *puja*, then fine, just do *puja*. But don’t do the dancing program.⁸ If you do that, it will get wild. People will say, “What are those Muslims doing?” But Ghazi Miya replied, “No, this is my personal deity, and I’ll worship him properly!”

There were so many people who came to watch! It’s only to be expected – Professor Sahab, if the god were to possess you and you were to dance, here in the Dak Bungalow, many people would come to see. They would want to know how it is that a foreigner can be possessed. Well, that’s what happened in Firozpur. Of course the other villagers went, but so did those from outside the village. Even people who usually don’t watch such things somehow took the time, because they were so curious to see what would happen.

And do you know what? I’ve never seen as much energy (*shakti*) as I saw in that *devta* that day! [...] [And] the most interesting thing was that many other people from the village were also possessed by their ancestral gods. Even those who never attend such rituals were possessed. I was the priest, so I had to [identify the “dancing” gods and] ask, “Who are you? Where have you come from?” And they all said, “I am so and so, and they imprisoned me for such a long time, they didn’t even ask about me; but from now on I will take my *puja* regularly” [...] There was also a second *puja* that night, in the same village, the same kind of *puja*. They did the whole program, with dancing etc., but the only ones to attend were people from that village, and not from anywhere else. Why not? Because they knew beforehand that if they let everyone know what was going on, there would be a big disturbance. So when the god came over the sponsor of the *puja*, I asked who it was, and he said, “I am the god of this village, I am its protector, and I will punish whoever tries to oppose me!” And he took me to his shrine. I didn’t even know where it was: the god showed me. So we did *puja* there. [...] the old shrine was covered up with earth, stones, etc. And we found some things there⁹ when we excavated it. [...]

So I’ve done these two jobs there, and I have one more to do. That fellow with whom you spoke yesterday – last month I did a healing ritual for his son. I went and summoned the *devta*. They said that they had buried the god and wanted to worship it, and asked me to

give them a time to do so. I said, "You tell me the time when you want to do it," and so that *puja* is still left to do. It will be in November.

Of course the *devta* is afflicting them, after they worshiped him for ages and then stopped! Now Ghazi Miya's brother went on the Hajj, so you might say that he has become a hardcore Muslim, but after the god showed his anger, he, too, had to take part [in the rituals]. They are part of the same family, after all. And so they will all prepare themselves for the *puja* this November. Even though their sons, who have jobs elsewhere, are saying "I've never seen it, I don't believe it," etc, they say, "Look, you'll have to believe, you'll have to give the *puja* – it's our ancestral god (*paitrik devta*)!"

My friend the priest did not believe that the Muslims would be able to dance. As he said,

they don't really know much, because they haven't seen it. Among us Hindus, if I have to do a *puja*, then three or four others will come. And we have seen such rituals since childhood. But they haven't seen them, and so we have to tell them what to do, and explain that first this will happen, and then that will happen, etc. Actually it's the same with us – sometimes there are people who don't know very much, and we have to tell them as well [...] and there is also a difference between old and young. The older ones have seen it and sometimes know quite a bit, but the younger ones have never seen it and one has to tell them everything.

Another priest ridiculed the Muslims' style of being possessed:

You should see how they dance! When they make the gods dance, each of them dances separately, but when one Muslim gets possessed, then another one falls on top of him, and a third on top of the first two, and so on, until there is just a big pile of writhing, possessed people!

It was difficult for me to evaluate these statements without seeing the ritual myself. Local Hindus typically make rather exaggerated characterizations of Muslims, and this has increased in recent years with the rise of Hindu nationalism and Islamic extremism. Predictably, such statements often have to do with food restrictions; specifically with the consumption of beef or pork. For example, another local priest told me that in Mecca, there is a *shiva linga* (a symbol of the Hindu god Shiva) with a big pot of beef in front of it, which helps exclude Hindus from Mecca, since they won't eat it. Shiva is there in the form of an image, he says, but they throw stones at him and call him a ghost.¹⁰ About ten or fifteen years ago, he added, some bearded Maulvis brought cow flesh to the hamlet in large van, and fed it to the residents of Firozpur. Given the fact that such implausible stories often circulated about Muslims and their activities, I knew that I had to see one of these rituals for myself before I could judge the type and degree of Muslim participation in them.

In March 2007 the priest told me that the *puja* would be held in November, and eight months later I was back to see it. At this point, the Muslim missionaries had been in the village for about two-and-a-half years, and the call to *namaz* was being sounded

every morning at 4:30. They had collected 100 rupees from each household in Firozpur for their upkeep and costs, and stayed there, teaching the villagers how to be “better Muslims”. There were three of them, clothed in very distinctive Muslim style, with long shirts, beards, and prayer caps such as one very rarely sees in the rural districts of the state. Largely because of their presence, there was much indecision and uncertainty about the forthcoming *puja*, and no one was sure if it would happen or not. Not only did the missionaries discourage the Firozpur Muslims from doing it, the Hindus teased them as well. I overheard one local shopkeeper calling out, “Muslims doing *puja*? They are supposed to worship only one god, and here they are worshiping local demons and doing *puja*! What kind of Muslims are you?” To which an old Muslim man replied, “Yes, we’re doing *puja*. We live here, too! Who is to stop us doing *puja*?” And the priest, who had a professional interest in the whole affair, chimed in, “Call him Allah, call him Bhagwan, it’s all the same.”

Finally the *puja* took place, next to Ghazi Miya’s cowshed, adjacent to his house. Two sets of priests were summoned – low-caste drummers and high-caste Brahmins. In comparison to dozens of other versions I had seen, this performance of the ritual seemed flat. The drummers were not honored as much as they were elsewhere, and the hosts did not even prepare a proper ritual seat (*dulainchi*) for them. A canopy (*chanoya*) had been erected, and a cotton rug was put on the ground, but not much else. They did not even light a fire (*dhuni*), which struck me as particularly odd. But Ghazi Miya and his brother’s style of possessed “dancing” did not, as far as I could tell, differ significantly from that of the Hindus in adjacent villages. During the performance there was some discussion about Goril as the family’s *devta*: Ghazi Miya said that Goril would protect the family and make it prosper so long as it continued to have faith. Once the *puja* was over, the priests and Gazi Miya said that it was important to teach the next generation how to uphold the old traditions. Both statements were made loudly and publicly, so that all could hear.

The most unusual thing about the performance was that the two brothers danced the various roles alone. Clearly, their fellow-villagers had decided not to participate. Was this because of my presence? At one point, Ghazi Miya said, “They are all becoming Muslims now, they won’t take part.” Indeed, it seemed that from the entire village, only these two brothers were really committed to the cult of Goril. Be that as it may, the brothers and the priests told me that there would certainly be a big crowd the next day. And they were right: the crowd was much larger, and as I watched the *puja*, it seemed to me that it followed the usual forms. The brothers were rather ill-prepared – for example when Hanuman possessed his devotee and asked for fruit, they didn’t have an apple or an orange ready – but this was probably because they had no help from their neighbors. The ritual culminated, as is normal, with a goat sacrifice, but this was done *halal* style, slitting the throat of the animal rather than decapitating it. The most impressive moment was at the end of the performance, when Kaluva (a Muslim *devta*, the companion of Goril) possessed his devotee. While in trance, he answered the

villagers' questions about their various illnesses and difficulties (a standard conclusion to all such rituals). Perhaps a quarter of the village women came forward to consult the oracle, and it seemed to me that they treated him just as normal Hindus would, employing the same bodily posture, etc.

Many women from nearby Hindu villages came as well, and there were quite a few Hindu men in the audience. But despite this evidence of amity between the communities, commensal and other restrictions were strictly observed: the Brahmans did not eat or drink anything, while the low-caste Hindu musicians drank only black tea with sugar, refusing to accept any of the other sacrificial foods that were distributed, and left before the sacrificial meal (innards cooked in water) could be pressed on them. The anthropologist ate everything.

What does this event tell us about ritual, habitus, and the *hysteresis* effect? One might have expected that local Muslims, determined as they were to stop practicing Hindu rituals, would no longer be able to become possessed by local deities and effectively "dance." After all, many urbanized and educated people from the area had lost the ability to do so, without explicitly seeking to make any break with their own tradition. But the performance of Ghazi Miya and his brother showed that they were still able to take part in the local ritual system, along with its forms of possession, and the remarks of the priest suggested that this was – at least until recently – true of their neighbors as well. No doubt the dedication of the brothers to their ancestral cult, and the hostility of their neighbors to it, made the situation more complex, still it seems likely that until recently, village Muslims were quite capable of full, embodied participation in these practices. Those living in these mountain villages found it easier to dance than those living far from them, regardless of religious affiliation, and this relationship began only recently to break down, following the Muslims' collective decision to stop observing Hindu rituals. I conclude that here at least, ritual habitus is as much a matter of continual exposure to ritual practice, as it is of membership in a particular religious community.

Notes

- 1 "un ka utara kaisa ho sakta?" He was referring to the fact that no Hindus in the area will eat food prepared by a Muslim.
- 2 *Sarola* Brahmans are the highest-ranked local Brahmans; therefore anyone can eat food from their hands (see Sanwal 1976).
- 3 Here and elsewhere, when an informant used an English term I have underlined it in the translation.
- 4 *Athwar* is a complex ritual in which eight (*ath*) animals are sacrificed.
- 5 Goril is the local name for Golu, a deified king of neighboring Kumaon whose cult is very widespread. It seemed to me that in the late 1990s and during the following decade, his cult was very popular amongst the lowest local castes.

- 6 *Puja*, a ritual in which offerings are made to a god or goddess in exchange for their blessings.
- 7 See Simpson (1997) for a particularly brilliant analysis of this situation.
- 8 In other words, „Don't let anyone get possessed by the *devtas*!“ Possession is locally understood as the gods (or ghosts) „dancing“ in a person's body.
- 9 Presumably the god's *nishan* or „signs“, his tridents, firetongs, etc.
- 10 He used the word *pret*. This is perhaps based on the tradition of „stoning Satan“ in Mecca during the Hajj.

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